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ABSTRACT

The fissures, if not chasms, between two recently published histories of the field of communication demonstrate that teachers/scholars of communication lack an agreed-upon recollection of their social and intellectual origins. The influence of muckrakers has been so great that, paradoxically, they seem easy to ignore in constructing a history of the academic field of communication. The muckrakers updated the 19th-century practice of the sensational expose, married this practice to mass media, and set in motion a method to diffuse the progressive reform movement of the early 20th century. Popular muckraking directly influenced the academic study of communication. American academic propaganda critique was extinguished by social and intellectual conditions attending World War II. Popular and academic criticisms of the Vietnam War reached back to propaganda analysis and to the muckraking tradition. Although the muckraking spirit animated the revival of social critique in the 1960s and 1970s, there is some tendency in the 1990s to replay the extinguishing of progressive propaganda critique of the 1940s. One of the most persistent myths in the history of academic communication study is the "Four Founders" thesis of Wilbur Schramm. The thesis was not initially presented as "history" but rather as an idealized prescription for the future of academic communication study. Although labeling the Four Founders thesis as myth, a recent history of the field essentially reanimates the thesis by focusing on four of six individuals who enjoy chapter-length treatment as key players in the growth of communication study. (RS)

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Toward a History of the Field: The Fall of Political Criticism in Communication in the 1930s and 1940s and the Rise of Science

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I. Introduction:

A. Two recently-published histories of the field of communication have little in common.

A.1. Everett M. Rogers, A History of Communication Study: A Biographical Approach (New York: Free Press, 1994) presents the history of the field of communication as involving three grand founders (Darwin, Freud, and Marx), two intellectual programs (the Frankfurt School and the Chicago School), six key research leaders (Lasswell, Lazarsfeld, Lewin, Hovland, Wiener, and Shannon), and one key institutionalizer (Schramm).

A.2. Herman Cohen, The History of Speech Communication: The Emergence of a Discipline, 1914-1945 (Annandale, VA: Speech Communication Association, 1994) examines how teachers of oral English in the National Council of Teachers of English turned to rhetoric, elocution, early experimental psychology, inter-world-war studies of mental hygiene, and discussion/debate as resources for establishing what has become the present-day Speech Communication Association.

B. If one juxtaposes Rogers's "Principal Figures in the History of Communication Study" (66 individuals) to Cohen's Author Index (approximately 270 individuals), the result is an overlap of five persons whom Rogers and Cohen jointly regard as founders of communication study: David Berlo, John Dewey, Sigmund Freud, Walter Lippmann, and Herbert Spencer.

B.1. Of the five, only one would accept, in a matter-of-fact manner, the designation of founder of the communication field (Berlo's consulting resume affirms this attribution).

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B.2. The other four (Dewey, Freud, Lippmann, and Spencer) either have greater connection to academic fields other than communication and/or are claimed by these other fields. It is unlikely that any of the four would regard himself as having participated directly in the establishment of the academic field of communication. At best, our field may claim these savants as founders only in the sense that all four have exerted a significant general influence on American intellectual life.

C. The fissures, if not chasms, between Rogers's and Cohen's histories not only demonstrate that teachers/scholars of communication lack an agreed-upon recollection of their social and intellectual origins but also suggest that writers lack the means for effecting a rapprochement in historical sensibility.

C.1. Some progress in producing a general history of the communication field may be made if we attend, on the one hand, to the most overlooked strain of communication criticism in America and, on the other, to the most persistent myth of communication history.

C.2. The influence of the muckrakers has been so great that this group, paradoxically, seems easy to ignore in constructing a history of the academic field of communication.

C.3. One direct result of overlooking the muckrakers as founders of communication study is to center the history of the communication field in the work of early students of quantitative mass communication research.

II. The Muckrakers: Forgotten Figures of American Communication History.

(The following treatment of the muckrakers is explicated in various of my publications, for instance: "Propaganda Studies in American Social Science: The Rise and Fall of the Critical Paradigm," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 73 (1987), 60-78: "Progressive Propaganda Critics and the Magic Bullet Myth," Critical Studies in Mass Communication, 6 (1989), 225-246; "Propaganda and American Ideological Critique," in Communication Yearbook 14, ed. James Anderson (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1991), pp. 239-255; and "The Realm of Propaganda," chapter 1 of Channels of Propaganda (Bloomington, IN: ERIC/Edinfo, 1994). My forthcoming Propaganda and Democracy [Cambridge University Press] will provide a more synoptic and integrated account of how the muckrakers and their intellectual kin figured in the history of communication study in America.)

A. Neither Rogers's nor Cohen's histories pay much attention to the muckrakers. However, these reform writers set in motion a line of popular and academic work that has influenced succeeding generations of intellectuals in the United States.

A.1. The muckrakers updated the nineteenth-century practice of the sensational expose, married this practice to mass media, and set in motion a method to diffuse the progressive reform movement of the early twentieth century. (The works of Louis Filler may be consulted in regard to these points.)

A.1.a. The muckrakers' method was to use copious documentation to demonstrate how American institutions (public and private) failed to live up to traditional ideals of honesty, fair play, and public spiritedness.

A.1.b. Central to the work of the muckrakers was the idea that exposes of wrong doing would enable the public to become more participatory and thereby force institutions and special interest groups to cease and desist from corrupt and anti-democratic practices.

A.2. The muckrakers assumed that the public possessed sufficient intelligence and competence such that, when people were well-informed, they could effect appropriate social change.

A.3. The muckrakers were allied to the Progressive Movement and therefore favored progressive reforms to make participatory democracy feasible in an urban, technological society that increasingly was dedicated to efficient production.

B. A special strain of muckraking focused directly on the role of communication channels, practices, and practitioners in the building of the better society. This strain began with Ray Stannard Baker, continued with Will Irwin, George Seldes, Vance Packard, I.F. Stone, and still exerts an impact in the work of such present-day writers as Ben Bagdikian.

B.1. Ray Stannard Baker. Baker's series on strong-arm tactics by the railroad corporations included his article on "How Railroads Make Public Opinion," McClure's Magazine (March 1906).

B.2. Will Irwin. Irwin's series of articles on the American newspaper (1911) was described by sociologist Robert Park as the quintessential history of the American press.

B.3. Upton Sinclair, who mixed his progressivism with socialism, also greatly influenced early communication study. Among the studies produced by Sinclair were his exposes of journalism (The Brass Check), education (The Goose-step and The Goslings), religion (The Profits of Religion), publishing (Money Writes!), and literature and art (Mammonart).

B.4. George Seldes. Seldes not only wrote a one-man library of media criticism but also produced arguably the first publication devoted exclusively to criticism of the American press (In Fact, published between 1940 and 1950).

B.5. I.F. Stone. In I.F. Stone's Weekly, Stone continued between 1953 and 1971 the independent criticism of politics and propaganda initiated by Seldes.

B.6. Vance Packard. Packard's books (e.g., The Hidden Persuaders) made him a leader in communication-oriented social critique in the 1950s and 1960s.

B.7. Ben Bagdikian. Bagdikian's The Media Monopoly has continued the tradition of progressive, muckraking criticism into the present day.

C. Popular muckraking directly influenced the academic study of communication.

C.1. Early in his career, Walter Lippmann was influenced by muckraking, for instance, in his work with Lincoln Steffens.

C.1. Academic propaganda study, which grew up after the Great War, marked a confluence of prewar anti-propaganda muckraking (ala Baker and Irwin) with concerns about mass institutional manipulation that were raised by the public-opinion campaigns of the war years.

C.1.a. Academicians in history, political science, sociology, psychology, economics, journalism, and speech were directly influenced by the impulse to incorporate the concept of propaganda into social theory and critique.

C.1.b. John Dewey and Walter Lippmann, whom both Rogers and Cohen regard as pivotal in communication study, were influenced by the post-Great-War propaganda analysis movement.

D. American academic propaganda critique was extinguished by social and intellectual conditions attending to World War II (as I have argued in several of the above-named articles or chapters).

D.1. Social conditions: Liberal intellectuals blamed propaganda critique for having retarded American entry into the anti-fascist crusade of World War II.

D.2. Intellectual conditions: Muckraking work by academic critics drew upon certain features of academic social science that, in the context of the 1930s and 1940s, were regarded as weak points.

D.2.a. Propaganda critique and other such muckraking by academicians appeared too popular and too intellectually colloquial to be regarded as serious work.

D.2.b. Propaganda critique and other such muckraking did not meet the methodological requirements that increasingly were required for work to be considered "scientific."

D.2.c. Propaganda critique, for all its postwar breadth, lacked a deeply-grounded supporting structure of theory of the kind available to Marxist critics or to Chicago-School social scientists.

D.3. Muckraking work by academic critics of communication exposed embarrassing features of the burgeoning alliance between quantitative communication researchers and their sources of funding in the granting foundations.

D.3.a. Muckrakers embarrassed the Rockefeller Foundation in 1914-1915 by arguing that this foundation funded research to help whitewash unfair labor practices by the Rockefeller corporations.

D.3.b. Sociologists Robert S. Lynd and Alfred McClung Lee, both central figures in academic propaganda study, produced works highly critical of the alliances being established between social-science researchers and elite institutions. Quantitative researchers were disturbed by these aspersions.

D.4. Quantitative researchers of communication studiously ignored the muckraking tradition of criticism.

D.4.a. Research conferences sponsored by the Rockefeller foundation in 1939-1941 and by the Social Science Research Council in the 1950s made no place for propaganda critique.

D.4.b. American quantitative scholars were attracted to Frankfurt-School criticism because the early work of this group was highly theoretical and safely unconnected to recent American social history. However, Theodor Adorno did show some early proclivity to embarrass the research program of Paul Lazarsfeld by posing questions to broadcasters that were perceived as hostile. Not until the 1960s, did Frankfurt-School work begin to emerge as a major resource for critiquing practices of American mass communication.

E. Both popular and academic criticisms of the Vietnam War and of elite manipulation in the 1960s reached back to propaganda analysis and to the muckraking tradition.

E.1. Muckraking influenced popular anti-establishment critiques, e.g., The Selling of the President 1968.

E.2. Muckraking influenced academic critiques, e.g., the Public Doublespeak program of the National Council of Teachers of English.

F. Although the muckraking spirit animated the revival of social critique in the 1960s and 1970s, there is some tendency in the 1990s to replay the extinguishing of progressive propaganda critique that took place in the 1940s.

F.1. Just as the work of the Frankfurt School intrigued quantitative researchers of the 1940s who were disinterested in muckraking, so too are many contemporary critics of social influence drawn to frameworks of criticism that are fundamentally nonprogressive.

These nonprogressive frameworks divide society into oppressors and victims in contrast to progressivism's vision of greater and more-intelligent general citizen participation resulting from exposure of specific abuses; they see the social and intellectual victory of oppressed groups as the route to utopia rather than progressivism's vision of accommodation and reform resulting from intelligent discussion in the whole public.

F.2. Major academic critical programs that tend to diverge from progressivism include Marxist criticism, feminist criticism, and Afrocentric criticism.

None of these academic critical programs are immune from the influence of traditional American muckraking and progressivism; however, partisans of each seem less hopeful than the muckrakers (a) that the public is capable of intelligent discussion leading to well-chosen reform having general benefits and (b) that social utopia can result without greater power and prestige accruing to the currently-oppressed group and away from the group of race/class/gender oppressors.

F.3. Popular "race/class/gender-ism" represents a tendency to extract, and focus upon, the racial, class-oriented, or gender-based elements in any given social dispute. This form of critique is more narrow than the generalized focus of muckraking on any person or any institution that is engaging in self-interested manipulation.

F.4. American intellectual and social life might be considerably transformed if academic and popular race/class/gender-ism replaces traditional progressivism and muckraking. During the next decades such a transformation may or may not take place with either desirable or undesirable results for social and intellectual life in the United States.

III. One of the most persistent myths in the history of academic communication study is the "Four Founders" thesis of Wilbur Schramm.

A. The thesis was not initially presented as "history" but rather as an idealized prescription for the future of academic communication study.

B. The thesis originated in connection with the expansion of quantitative communication study that accompanied national mobilization for World War II.

B.1. In 1941, John Marshall of the Rockefeller Foundation outlined studies of wartime communication under the categories of content, audience and response. Prominent elements included Harold Lasswell's content-analysis program in the Library of Congress, Paul Lazarsfeld's Office of Radio Research, Hadley Cantril's various studies of public opinion, and a number of other studies of print and film.

B.2. In 1943, Irving Janis outlined studies of communication under the headings of communicator's environment, communicator's personality, media, content, audience's environment, audience's psychology, and reactions to communication.

C. The wartime outlines, which were not intended as history but rather as descriptions of an idealized, truly scientific, field of communication, began to emerge as "history" when Bernard Berelson identified six favored lines of communication study at the 1954 Social Science Research Council conference on research on public communication.

C.1. The first four were: (a) Lasswell's content-analysis program; (b) Lazarsfeld's audience-studies program; (c) the group-dynamics research of Kurt Lewin and others; (d) Hovland's program of controlled experiments.

C.2. The remaining two included studies of institutions such as by Robert Leigh and broad macro-historical studies such as by Harold Innis.

C.3. Other conferees mentioned the following additional programs of significant communication research: the psychiatric work of Ruesch and Bateson; the information theory of Shannon and Weaver; the psycholinguistics of Osgood; and role theory.

D. Berelson reiterated his idealized treatment of the major lines of communication study in a 1959 article: "The State of Communication Research," Public Opinion Quarterly, 23, No. 1 (1959), 1-17.

D.1. The four major lines of communication study, as Berelson saw them, continued to be: (a) Lasswell, (b) Lazarsfeld, (c) Lewin, and (d) Hovland.

D.2. Berelson also mentioned certain "minor" or less-influential lines of study including: the reformist approach (e.g., the Hutchins Commission); the historical approach of Innis and David Riesman; the journalistic approach of Ralph Casey, Wilbur Schramm and others; the mathematical approach of Shannon and Weaver; the psycholinguistic approach of Osgood and Miller; the psychiatric approach of Ruesch and Bateson.

E. Wilbur Schramm, chair of the 1954 SSRC conference, presented an explicit "Four Founders" interpretation of the origins of academic communication study: "The Beginnings of Communication Study in the United States," Communication Yearbook 4, ed. Dan Nimmo (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1980), pp. 74-82.

In this view, Lasswell, Lewin, Lazarsfeld, and Hovland represented more than the most promising, or the most truly scientific, or the most modern lines of research (as in 1941, 1943, 1954, and 1959); now their work supplied a bona fide "history" of the beginnings of academic communication study.

F. Although labeling the Four Founder's thesis as myth, Rogers essentially reanimates the thesis in A History of Communication Study by transforming Schramm's Four Founders into four of the six individuals enjoying chapter-length treatment as key players in the growth of communication study. (The other two, Norbert Wiener and Claude Shannon, are representative of other wartime and postwar quantitative lines of research approvingly noted by the SSRC conferees in 1954 and by Berelson in 1959.)

F.1. The earlier sections of Rogers' book focus on predecessors who helped build the intellectual stage on which the six key players functioned such that tracing influences on the key players constitutes the actual history of communication study. In this view:

F.1.a. Darwin greatly influenced the growth of social study as a science.

F.1.b. Marx and Freud established lines of thinking that influenced the Frankfurt School, the critical school accepted as interesting by the early quantitative communication researchers.

F.1.c. Freud greatly influenced Lasswell.

F.1.d. The Chicago School first systematically connected the study of communication to leading-edge social science.

F.2 As a whole, Rogers's history of communication study retains the essence of the Four Founders thesis: to wit, that the actual history of the field may be identified by focusing on lines of research that quantitatively-oriented scholars of the 1940s viewed as the most modern, most scientific, and most promising avenues of communication study.

The opening and closing sections of Rogers's book focus on Wilbur Schramm who, more than anyone else, helped institutionalize in leading universities the wartime vision of quantitative communication study

IV. Conclusion.

A. Rogers's and Cohen's histories of communication study advance our understanding of the antecedents of today's institutes of academic communication inquiry (such as at Stanford and Illinois) and of the Speech Communication Association.

B. We may question the adequacy of focusing the history of the communication field on the origins of present institutional arrangements and objectives.

B.1. It is likely that academic students of communication will lack satisfactory intellectual and institutional connections so long as their historical understandings of communication study emphasize the present-day divisions of university departments and national professional associations.

B.2. Reconstructing the history of communication study is a project that will occupy many minds for many years.

B.3. There is a simple test to measure when communication teachers/scholars have begun to succeed in reconstructing their history: When histories of communication show a high level of overlap in the names mentioned as pivotal, then we can say that a first or preliminary stage has been reached in reconstructing the history of communication study.

By this measure, the muckrakers and propaganda critics have yet to become part of the integrated history of communication study. Of the nine muckrakers or propaganda critics mentioned in this present paper (Baker, Irwin, Seldes, Sinclair, Packard, Stone, Bagdikian, Lee, and Lynd) only one (Robert S. Lynd) is included in Rogers's "Principal Figures in the History of Communication Study" and none are cited in Cohen's Author Index.